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CONJURING RATS.

IN New England, as well as in other parts of the United States, it is still believed, by certain persons, that if a house is infested with rats, these can be exiled by the simple process of writing them a letter, in which they are recommended to depart, and make their abode in another locality. The letter should indicate precisely the habitation to which they are assigned, and the road to be taken, and should contain such representations of the advantages of the change as may be supposed to affect the intelligence of the animal in question. This method of freeing a house from its domestic pests is well known, but is commonly regarded as a jest. As in most such cases, however, what is supposed to be mere humor is, in fact, the survival of a perfectly serious and very ancient usage. This custom, still existing in retired places, is illustrated by the following document, the genuineness of which may be relied on.

The country house of a gentleman, whose permanent home in Boston, being infested by rats, the owner proposed to use poison ; but the care-taker, who was in charge of the empty house, represented that there was a better way, namely, to address an epistle to the creatures ; he prepared a letter, of which the following is a reproduction.

* * * * Maine, October 31, 1888.

MESSRS. RATS AND CO., — Having taken quite a deep interest in your welfare in regard to your winter quarters I thought I would drop you a few lines which might be of some considerable benefit to you in the future seeing that you have pitched your winter quarters at the summer residence of * * * * No. 1 Seaview Street, I wish to inform you that you will be very much disturbed during cold winter months as I am expecting to be at work through all parts of the house, shall take down ceilings, take up floors, and clean out every substance that would serve to make you comfortable, likewise there will be nothing left for you to feed on, as I shall remove every eatable substance ; so you had better take up your abode elsewhere. I will here refer you to the farm of * * * * No. 6 Incubator Street, where you will find a splendid cellar well filled with vegetations of (all) kinds besides a shed leading to a barn, with a good supply of grain, where you can live snug and happy. Shall do you no harm if you heed to my advice ; but if not, shall employ "Rough on Rats."

Yours,

* * * *

This letter was greased, rolled up, and thrust into the entrance of the rat-holes, in order that it might be duly read, marked, and in-

wardly digested ; the result being, as the owner of the house was assured, that the number of the pests had been considerably diminished.

The reader cannot but admire the persuasive style of the Yankee farmer, and the judicious mixture of argument, blandishment, and terror, exhibited in the document ; while in the choice of the barn of a neighbor, recommended as a desirable place of abode, is shown a shrewdness worthy of its reward.

That the practice of writing letters to rats is not confined to New England will appear from the following extract, taken from the "Baltimore Sun," February 21, 1888 (as cited in the "New York Times," February 23) :—

The testimony in the contest over the will of George Jessup, of "Kenilworth," near Cockneyville, in Baltimore County, was completed yesterday. The will bequeaths "Kenilworth," the ancestral home of the Jessup family, to George Jessup, Esq., son of the testator, after the death of his stepmother, and the widow, and other children of the testator seek to have the will set aside, on the ground that the elder Mr. Jessup, who died April 3, 1887, in the 84th year of his age, was of unsound mind. Among the witnesses for the defence examined yesterday was Mr. James Howard, residing in Baltimore County, about two miles from "Kenilworth." He testified that Mr. Jessup was entirely competent. On cross-examination, Colonel Charles Marshall asked him if he ever proposed to Mr. Jessup to try to drive the rats away from the house.

"I did, sir," replied the witness.

"How did you tell him you were going to drive them away?"

"By letters."

"How were you going to do it by letters?"

"By reading them."

"To whom?"

"To the rats."

"How much was he going to give you for doing that?"

"There was no contract between us."

"You were to write the letter and he was to read it?"

"I was to write the letter and Mr. Jessup was to read it."

"You thought that would drive them away?"

"I did n't think anything about it ; I tried it, and I know it."

"You have done that?"

"I have done it."

"Did you write a letter to Mr. Jessup's rats, or ask him to write one to them?"

"Mr. Jessup wanted to write it, but I would not let him ; I wrote it when I went home that night ; at least I got my daughter to write it, and I took and gave it to Mr. Jessup."

"What had he to do with it?"

"I told him to take the letter to the meat house, and read it, and lay the letter down on the meat-house floor."

"Did he do that?"

"He told me he did."

"In that letter did n't you tell them they had lived on Mr. Jessup long enough?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did n't you tell them they must leave?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"Did n't you tell them to go up straight to the lane?"

"Yes, sir."

"Past the stone house, and keep on up the hill, right past the church, and not to go down the turnpike or up the turnpike, but to keep on until they came to the large white house on the right, and turn in there; that it was Captain Low's house and they would get plenty to eat there?"

"I did."

"Did Mr. Jessup report to you that the paper had disappeared?"

"Yes, sir, he did."

"Did n't you tell him that broke the charm?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did he say had become of the paper?"

"He did n't know, and I did n't know."

"He came to tell you that it had disappeared — the rats did not go?"

"The last time I called on him, he said that he really believed a great many of them did go, but they had n't all gone."

"All those who understood the letter had gone?"

"I don't know about that. May be some understood it, and did n't go, too."

During this examination the attorneys and their clients, the jury, court officials, and the large audience were convulsed with laughter, and during the day the slightest allusion to the "rat story" was the signal for a fresh outburst.

Mrs. Katie Barker, one of the contestants of the estate, confirmed the evidence of Mr. Howard, and said the episode occurred in 1882. Her father, she said, shut the door, and refused to allow her to accompany him any farther when he went out to read the letter to the rats.

It will be noticed that in this case the writ is to be served *viva voce*, and also that the document must not be written by the same person who reads it, who, apparently, must be the master of the house.

As usual with American superstitions, the practice can be traced in the mother country. R. Chambers says, in "Popular Rhymes of Scotland" (new ed. p. 339), under the heading, "A charm against rats and mice," —

When these creatures become superabundant in a house of the humbler class, a writ of ejectment, in the following form, is issued upon them, by being stuck up legibly upon the walls.

Ratton and mouse,
 Lea' the puir woman's house,
 Gang awa' owre by to 'e mill,
 And there ane and a' ye'll get your fill.

It will be observed that at the mill there would be a bridge, one object being, probably, to get the creatures on the other side of running water, which they would find a difficulty in recrossing, all ghosts and evil spirits being deterred by a stream, as illustrated in "Tam o' Shanter : " —

Now do thy speedy utmost, Meg !
 And win the key-stane o' the brig :
 There at them thou thy tail may toss,
 A running stream they dare na cross.

The formal citation, however, is apparently considered to give the pests the privilege of going over, and reaching a territory from which they would not be able to return.

The practice attributed to Ireland, of rhyming rats to death, is repeatedly alluded to by writers of Shakespeare's period. Thus Randolph, —

My poets
 Shall with a satire, steep'd in gall and vinegar,
 Rhime 'em to death, as they do rats in Ireland.

And Ben Jonson, —

Rhime 'em to death, as they do Irish rats,
 In drumming tunes.

It is with reference to the same custom that Rosalind says, in "As You Like It" (act iii. sc. 2) : "I was never so be-rhymed since Pythagoras' time, that I was an Irish rat, which I can hardly remember."

The Elizabethan poets have not their folk-lore quite right. Rats are not charmed to death, but charmed to another habitation ; for it is one of the principles of sorcery, that in order to conjure away any evil, it must be transferred, not annihilated ; as Bacon says in his essay on Envy : —

Lastly, to conclude this part, as we said in the beginning that the act of envy had somewhat in it of witchcraft, so there is no other cure of envy but the cure of witchcraft ; and that is, to remove the lot (as they call it) and to lay it upon another ; for which purpose, the wiser sort of great persons bring in ever upon the stage somebody upon whom to derive the envy that would come upon themselves.

The popular notion formerly was, and in some places still is, that all living beings, however noxious, had their proper place in the

world, and were entitled to a share of its produce, provided that they did not exceed the limits of discretion. As E. Rolland remarks, in a work hereafter cited, exorcisms, formulas, and ceremonies are employed, not to "exterminate them, for one ought not to touch the life of these animals, which are, after all, creatures of the good God, but to cause them to quit the place of their depredations."

It is certainly singular, that the poets of the time of Elizabeth should have regarded as peculiarly barbarous and Irish a custom which has continued until the present time in America, and which must have been common among the peasantry of the sixteenth century, although apparently unknown to the scholars.

This practice is not confined to England, but also exists on the Continent. E. Rolland, in his "*Faune populaire de la France*," vol. i. p. 22, gives an account of beliefs respecting the conjuring of rats, mice, field-mice, and moles. It will be seen that the practice is identical with that mentioned.

In the Ardennes on scraps of paper are written the words: "Rats, male and female, you who have eaten the heart of St. Gertrude, I conjure you in her name to go into the plain of Rocroi." These notes are placed in holes where rats pass, taking care to smear, with butter or grease, the pieces of paper, of which have been made little balls. (The reporter of this custom suggests that the balls are poisoned, but this is an erroneous guess, as will be seen by comparison with the New England usage.) In other places, a kitchen pan is beaten with an old harrow's tooth, picked up by chance, while the words are uttered: "Beat for the rats! beat for the rats! Go to . . . ; there is a bridge to pass." Another exorcism runs: —

Rats et rates, souviens-toi
Que c'est aujourd'hui la Saint-Nicaise.
Tu partiras de chez moi
Sans attendre ton aise
Pour aller à . . . en poste
Tu t'en iras trois par trois.

In the note containing this formula, mention must be made of the person who writes, of the locality, and of the number to go in each file, which must be three, five, or seven. If a watercourse is to be passed, a board must be put across to serve as a bridge; and five *paters* and *aves* must be recited.

In the departments of Yonne, Aube, and Marne, the following exorcism is pronounced, while traversing the fields on the first Sunday of Lent, with lighted torches in hand: —

Sortez, sortez, d'ici mulots !
Ou je vais vous bruler les crocs !

Quittez, quittez ces blés !
 Allez vous trouverez
 Dans la cave du curé
 Plus a boire qu'à manger.

In the centre of France, this feast is known as *La Fête des Brandons*, or the Feast of the Torches, and is celebrated on the First Sunday in Lent. Laisnel de la Salle has given an interesting account of the ceremony.

After sunset, the whole population, armed with lighted torches of lighted straw, issue from the hamlets, and diffuse themselves among the fields and orchards. While the men brandish their torches among the boughs of the fruit-trees, the women and children surround the trunks with a ring of wheat straw. Wooden crosses are set up, the arms of which are provided with bundles of straw, which are fired. In some communes are chanted in chorus rhymes similar to those cited. In the neighborhood of Bourges, the peasants receive under such circumstances the names of *brandonneux* and *brandonneuse*, and the usage is called *brandeler*; the song chanted has various forms. An interesting variant is given by A. de Gubernatis, which might lead us to suspect that the original rhymes consisted of a series of verses, including a blessing of the trees, in order that the next season might be fruitful, as well as a banishment of the pests which injure them. This latter ceremony was performed on Twelfth Night.

The day of the *Brandons* appears originally to have ended with a feast, at which the principal feature was the consumption of a certain kind of fritters (*beignets*). The bearers of the torches endeavored, by the uncertain light of their flambeaux, to uproot as many plants of *nielle* (an obnoxious weed) as they could, and were rewarded with a proportional number of pancakes. In some districts, observes the writer on the customs of Central France from whom are borrowed these details, such fritters are made of millet; and he observes that the same was the case with cakes anciently offered to Ceres. In the department of the Cher, these delicacies are called *sanciaux*, a name which by derivation appears to indicate that they were considered as possessing a sacred character. Banquets are described in accounts of the sixteenth century as given on this day by vestries (*fabriques*) of the churches to the clergy, and as especially characteristic of such repasts are mentioned beans and warm cakes. A passage from the "Évangiles des quenouilles" sets forth: "He who, on the day of the

¹ *Croyances et Légendes du centre de la France*. Paris, 1875, i. 34, 42. See, also, vol. ii. p. 114 of this Journal. De Gubernatis, *Zoölogical Mythology*, London, 1872, ii. 74, cites Ducange as mentioning the same performance as elsewhere taking place on Christmas Eve. — The day of Saint Nicaise is December 14.

Brandons, burns his trees, will have no bugs or vermin for that year." These references, given by Laisnel de la Salle, seem to establish the celebrity and general observance of the rite in question, which has every appearance of being the survival of a religious festival of Roman antiquity.

Curiously enough, a nursery rhyme appears to furnish evidence that a practice similar to that of the French ceremony was once also common in England. The rhyme now runs : —

Snail, snail, come out of your hole,
Or I will beat you as black as a coal.

Mr. C. G. Leland, in this Journal, has suggested (vol. ii. p. 114) that *mole* ought to be substituted for snail, and in this, no doubt, he is correct ; the lines may have been : —

Mole, mole, come out of your hole,
Or I will burn you as black as a coal.

The allusion would be to the same rite as that described. The explanations of this rhyme were odd ; school-boys thought that the word *hole* meant the shell of the animal ; Mr. Halliwell-Phillips, that it related to the holes made by snails in certain limestone formations ; whereas, it would seem likely that the confusion with a familiar rhyme, common in many countries, in which the snail is adjured to put out its horns, such extension being a sign of fine weather,¹ led to the introduction of the snail into the present lines, where he had no right.

I am not able to follow either the practice of writing a letter to the rats, or the exorcistic ceremony of the *Four des Brandons*, in other European countries. But a singular chance has preserved the memory of the custom of addressing written citations to field-mice, and appears to prove it a pre-Christian practice, originally belonging to the Graeco-Roman world.

The "Geoponica" of Cornelius Bassus is a Greek treatise on agriculture, composed in the tenth century for Constantius Porphyrogenitus, Emperor of Constantinople ; but the composer has borrowed his material from earlier writers. The thirteenth book, in which occurs the passage relating to this subject, is regarded by the best critic of the work² as borrowed in the main from a certain Apollonius who wrote in the time of Hadrian, and who in his turn used Pliny and other authors. It cannot be shown that the particular passage belongs to this ancient material ; the character of the cita-

¹ Snail, snail, put out your horns,
I'll give you bread and barley-corns.

See *Nursery Rhymes of England*, 6th ed., London, no date, p. 272.

² W. Gemoll, in *Berliner Stud. f. class. Phil. und Arch.* i. 1884.

tion, however, as will be seen, seems to establish its claim to a pre-Christian derivation. The writer of the treatise, after giving recipes for poisoning field-mice, adds (xiii. 5) :—

Having taken a leaf of paper, write on it the following words : “I conjure you,¹ O mice who inhabit here, not to injure me yourselves, nor to allow any other mouse to do so ; and I give you this field² (mention which one it is). But if I find you residing here in the future, with the aid of the mother of the gods, I will cut you up into seven pieces.” Having written this, paste up the paper at the spot where the mice are, against a natural stone, taking care to keep the letters on the outside. I have written this, in order not to leave out anything ; but I do not believe all such things, heaven forbid ! And I counsel every one not to pay any attention to such rubbish.

The mention of the Mother of the Gods seems to stamp the formula as of ancient origin ; and obviously, from his contemptuous tone, the compiler would not have quoted the usage unless he had found it in his sources.

An examination of the passage shows that the custom was substantially the same as that which forms the subject of our article. Since the paper was affixed to the stone at night, and in the field, torches would of necessity be used ; according to the nature of primitive religion, the usage would take a ritual form, as indicated by the appeal to the goddess. We may suppose that the proclamation was read aloud, and heralded by beat of drum, as indicated by the survival in France.

The formal character of the citation addressed to the rats, in Scotland and America, connects the practice with the writs and excommunications against noxious animals employed in the Middle Age. Such a process against rats is said to have taken place at Autun as late as 1550, when the official of that town issued a summons to rats who were ravaging the canton of Lucenay. Chassané, assigned as an advocate to the defence, objected that his clients were not able to be present, inasmuch as the avenues to the court were blockaded by the cats. The affair seems a comic turn of what was originally a serious procedure, but I have not the means at hand for examining the case.

¹ The Greek word is *exorkizō*, “I exorcise you.” But it appears to me that the word is used in an earlier signification than that which it bears in ecclesiastical Greek (where it would be equivalent to the Latin *adjuro*), and that it here has the sense, “I bind you by an oath,” in which it is employed in the classical language. But to discuss this point would be to involve too long a digression.

² “According to the commentator, the field assigned the mice is a neighbor’s ; but it may be a patch of waste ground on the farmer’s own land.” J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, London, 1890, ii. 131. Frazer does not mention the modern parallel.

Exorcisms of this sort had a tendency to take an annual form, as has been shown to be the case in the example of the *Four des Brandons*. At Bourges, the curé of Saint-Pierre-le-Guillard every year exorcised a species of weevil which injured the buds of vines. In consequence of this ceremony, a street of Aron received the name of the *Rue des Urbets*. At Levroux, in the department of the Indre, on Ascension Day, the last vicar of the chapter of Saint-Silvain was bound to proceed in procession from the church to the tower of Bon-An, and from the platform of the latter to excommunicate the bugs who ravaged the surrounding country. At the end of the ceremony he was entitled to receive a sheep from the lord of the manor.¹

From what has been said, it would seem that the custom of writing to rats, as still occasionally practised in the United States, is a survival of the habit of issuing a formal proclamation to them; and further, that this proclamation, though at present not restricted to any particular time, may formerly have been an annual practice of a ceremonial character, belonging to one particular day of the year, and indeed to the festival of a special saint, under whose authority the injunction was declared.

It cannot be doubted that this mediæval rite was, in its turn, the survival of an ancient sacred festival; even with our limited means of information, I think that important observations could be made regarding this topic, on which, however, I will not now venture.

The Greek or Roman custom, mentioned by the Byzantine, as recorded, is also unconnected with any particular occasion, but perhaps, like its modern analogue, once had its place as part of a determinate ceremonial, connected with the worship of a deity.

From a psychological point of view, it is exceedingly interesting to observe the close correspondence of reasoning on the part of the Greek and the Yankee; but the palm of ingenuity and persuasiveness must certainly be awarded to the latter.

Since the above was written, I find in "La Tradition" (December, 1891), an article on "Les Brandons" by H. Carnoy, in which he brings together testimonies relative to the festival. This is mentioned in a document of 1297 as the *Four du Behourdich*, or Day of the Tournament, probably because a tournament was usually held at the time of the feast. According to analogy, if the truth could be known it would perhaps be found that the tourney superseded an ancient religious rite of a dramatic character.

The most interesting addition made by Carnoy, however, is an account of the day in Alsace, where this custom seems to bear an especially primitive stamp.²

¹ Laisnel de la Salle, *op. cit.* i. 41.

² Cited from Abbé Braun, *Légendes du Florival*, 1866, p. 75. For other points mentioned, see Carnoy's references.

In the valley of Poimbach, every year, on the first Sunday of Lent, the young lads, issuing from the vesper service, traverse the village in order to collect wood and stubble. They go from house to house singing, —

Stengel, Stengel
 Fur e goldigen Engel !
 Farn, farn,
 Fur e goldige Zahn !
 Straû, Straû,
 Fur en alti Frau !

As soon as the fagots come to the hill, they are piled up about a high pole solidly planted in the earth ; then, at the first stroke of the evening bell, while the whole village has its eyes fixed on this point, the fire is lighted, the flame sparkles and ascends, and the light, like a beacon, illuminates the mountain and the valley. The *Angelus* is recited, while the youths, each holding in his hand a torch, make a circle of the fire, repeating the words, —

Der Engel des Herre,
 Wir spreng de Herre
 Mit fürige Schitter,
 Wie laenger wie witter.

Meantime the shades of night fall on the valley. The torches then begin to descend the hill, appearing at first like a torrent of fire which advances, and afterwards as separate fires, which disperse and traverse the several properties, while this cry is heard repeated by the echoes : —

Das woll Gott ! Das soll grothe !

After this, the carriers of torches return to the village, singing a stanza which may be rendered : “ Maiden, give me a cake, my feet are cold, I hear the dish ring and the pan crackle, the cake is baked.”

The dialectic songs above given seem to denote that the torch-bearers represent angels, who are supposed to drive out ill spirits and pests of the crops. A French writer mentions that the inhabitants of the city of Senlis also held the feast on a mountain ; probably the sacred fire was originally lighted at first on an elevation, dances held about it, and from this burning pile torches were taken to bear in procession round the fields. The exorcistic idea, which has survived longest, was perhaps also the earliest part of the rite.

William Wells Newell.